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## The TVA: Chattanooga's Hero

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HIST 297: Historiography

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For millions of Americans, life did an abrupt about-face in 1929. The Great Depression rendered thousands unemployed, caused crippling debt, starvation, crop loss, and split families apart. No place within the United States was exempt from the worldwide economic depression, including Chattanooga, Tennessee. A dirty, malaria-stricken city, Chattanooga and the surrounding area became a promising site for President Franklin Roosevelt's ideas on how to boost the economy. To combat the depression, FDR used government money to begin the "alphabet soup agencies" all throughout the U.S. that could employ people, but also be a significant addition to the country. Roads, canals, railways, and bridges were springing up throughout the fifty states. One of the seven agencies that still remain today is the Tennessee Valley Authority. Through the implementation of the TVA, the industrial, recreational, and environmental landscape of Chattanooga would forever change.

Dotted with decade-old farms and small businesses, Chattanooga was hardly the eclectic city it is today. Noted by an Indianapolis newspaper, the Tennessee Valley was known for its heavy rainfall, once one of the valley's most lucrative assets, which was now threatening the early 1930s community due to irresponsible farming and forestry.<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt saw the need of the people and created the TVA as a resource for them in all aspects of their lives, not just to battle flood control. Laid out in the original duty of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the agency was to, "... improve the navigability and to provide flood control of the Tennessee River; to provide for reforestation and the proper use of marginal lands. . ."<sup>2</sup> The goals of the organization were honorable, but in making the Chickamauga Dam and changing the waterways, the TVA uprooted

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<sup>1</sup> *The Indianapolis times*. (Indianapolis [Ind.]), 15 April 1935. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<sup>2</sup> Draves, 2014. "'It's Easier to Pick a Tourist than It Is a Bale of Cotton'": The Rise of Recreation on the Great Lakes of the South," *Southern Cultures* 20 (3), 90.

the lives of some Chattanoogaans. In order to build new reservoirs, dams, and powerplants, the TVA had to buy land that belonged to local farmers. Entire families were relocated, displaced, from farms where their families had resided for generations.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the residents were being paid for the land accumulated, and the new improvements to the area would outweigh their losses. President Roosevelt, in his dedication speech of the Chickamauga Dam, said, “...engineers told me that from floods alone the average annual damage in the Tennessee Valley was about \$25,000,000” and that the TVA’s developments would save “\$100,000,000 a year.”<sup>4</sup> Such a cutback on losses for the valley would boost the economy and constructing dams and powerplants required manual labor; labor the people of Chattanooga could supply and readily welcomed.

In a time of high unemployment, the TVA created jobs. When the TVA was created during the Great Depression, Halie Forstner said, “...the Tennessee Valley was a hard place to live.”<sup>5</sup> Quickly, the whole agency transformed the economy of the Tennessee Valley. Recently deceased, Chattanooga native Charles Hunt remembers the Chickamauga Dam (fig. 1.1) being built, saying, “I had a brother that helped build it [Chickamauga Dam]. Brother Roy in 1936.”<sup>6</sup> It was a memorable time for the city of



Fig. 1.1

Chattanooga. The dam would generate enough power to operate the homes, businesses, and

<sup>3</sup> McDonald and Muldowny, *TVA and the Dispossessed: the Resettlement of Population in the Norris Dam Area*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Draves, 2014. “‘It’s Easier to Pick a Tourist than It Is a Bale of Cotton’”: The Rise of Recreation on the Great Lakes of the South,” *Southern Cultures* 20 (3), 90.

<sup>5</sup> “How TVA Changed Lives.” Interview with Halie Forstner. TVA. Tennessee Valley Authority. Accessed April 7, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Hunt, Interview by Aimee Hunt. Informal Interview. Chattanooga, TN, 22 February 2020.

farms, as well as provide a cheaper way for goods to come and go through the river valley.<sup>7</sup> After the dam was completed, the jobs did not disappear. During the second World War, as men left to fight for their country, 108-year-old Halie Forstner recalls the uncertainty of what would become of the TVA. The agency had become so pivotal to the region. Women, including Ms. Forstner took jobs at TVA during the war; the jobs and electricity simply “life-changing.”<sup>8</sup> To this very day, the TVA provides over 10,000 jobs in the Valley.<sup>9</sup> It also continues to lure businesses of all kinds to the area, bringing in more opportunities for jobs.<sup>10</sup> Though created over eighty-five years ago, the presence of the Tennessee Valley Authority plays a massive role in the development of Chattanooga’s industries and economy.

With the new industrial capital of Chattanooga booming, the city, like the rest of America, began to enjoy some leisure time after the Great Depression. With the TVA damming up the waterways and buying land for new plants, they implemented recreational sites for the local Tennesseans. During the 1930s, as segregation was going on, land leased from the TVA to the State of Tennessee was used to establish state parks for African American, one being Booker T. Washington State Park.<sup>11</sup> The park, with over 300 acres of land, provided a lovely area for boating, swimming, and camping, among other outdoor activities. The Tennessee Valley Authority had made it their goal to aid in flood-control, but to also create civic improvement

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<sup>7</sup> Downs, *Transforming the South: Federal Development in the Tennessee Valley, 1915-1960*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014, 354.

<sup>8</sup> “How TVA Changed Lives.” Interview with Halie Forstner. TVA. Tennessee Valley Authority. Accessed April 7, 2020. Forstner is also quoted saying, “TVA made a new life for people. When you hadn’t had anything and then you had electric stoves and electric heaters and other appliances—it just made so much difference.”

<sup>9</sup> “TVA Competitors, Revenue and Employees - Owl Company Profile.” Owl. Accessed May 7, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Downs, *Transforming the South: Federal Development in the Tennessee Valley, 1915-1960*, 5294. In 2008, the TVA narrowly, but successfully recruited Volkswagen to build its new manufacturing plant in Chattanooga instead of another TVA site in Alabama.

<sup>11</sup> Draves, 2014. “‘It’s Easier to Pick a Tourist than It Is a Bale of Cotton’: The Rise of Recreation on the Great Lakes of the South,” *Southern Cultures* 20 (3), 102.

in Chattanooga, for recreational purposes.<sup>12</sup> New lakes and parks attracted locals, but was also an asset to bring in tourists and visitors. Chickamauga Lake was created by the dam and has become a lovely spot for day-time swimmers and is even home to the Chattanooga

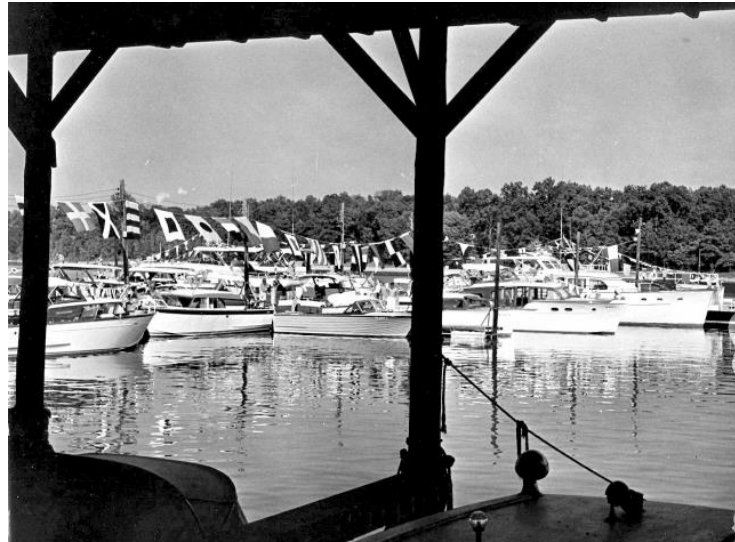


Fig. 1.2

Yacht Club, pictured in fig. 1.2.<sup>13</sup> Established in 1925, the club did not become one of Tennessee's best yacht clubs until Chickamauga Lake was established in 1940.<sup>14</sup> The out-door life of Chattanooga was booming.

As time went on, however, the industrial life began to take its toll on the environment. In 1969, Chattanooga was declared the United States "dirtiest city," a title to hurt tourism.<sup>15</sup> The air quality was terrible; smog enveloping the valley. The TVA had made Chattanooga their home, and after this news broke, the agency began finding solutions to implement a greener city. Partnering with other companies and the City of Chattanooga, the area is now one of the greenest, environmentally-friendly places in the U.S. From its first appearance in the Tennessee Valley to today, the TVA continues to help solve issues and remain vital to the Chattanooga area.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cebul, 2018. "Creative Competition: Georgia Power, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Creation of a Rural Consumer Economy, 1934-1955." *Journal of American History* 105, 60.

<sup>13</sup> *Boats*. Chattanooga Yacht Club: Chattanooga, Tennessee. Photograph.

<sup>14</sup> "History." Chattanooga Yacht Club. Accessed April 8, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> "How America's Dirtiest City in 1969 Became One of the Greenest." Matter Of Trust. Matter Of Trust, Inc. Accessed April 8, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

The relevance of nearly all the agencies formed during President Roosevelt's time in office have diminished. However, the Tennessee Valley Authority continues to operate and be vital to the Tennessee Valley region. Statistically, overall, the TVA averts over \$300 million dollars in flood damage a year and since the construction of their first dam, more than \$8.6 billion.<sup>17</sup> The numbers will only continue to grow. Published recently in the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, David Flessner writes:

“Chattanooga is the drainage point in the Tennessee River basin for more than 20,000 square miles of East Tennessee, Western Virginia, Western North Carolina, and North Georgia. Prior to the creation of the TVA in 1933, Chattanooga was nearly completely underwater during major floods in 1917 and in the worst flood ever in 1867.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1937, during its first years of operation, the agency kept control over the major floods that swept the area, and devastated other regions, just not the Tennessee Valley.<sup>19</sup> In 2019, just a little over a year ago, Chattanooga experienced heavy rainfall. The city is acclimated to such weather and was unaffected. However, based on maps prepared by the TVA, the amount of rain received, had it not been for the dams, would have covered the Chattanooga airport, and parts of Amnicola Highway and Brainerd.<sup>20</sup>

From the time it was implemented by the government, up to the present day, the TVA remains important to the Chattanooga. Though federally owned and having presidentially appointed directors, the TVA works as an independent agency.<sup>21</sup> Having the independence helps

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<sup>17</sup> Flessner, “Without TVA, Much of Chattanooga Would Now Be Underwater.” *timesfreepress.com*. Chattanooga Times Free Press, March 3, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Watkins, T. H. *The Great Depression – America in the 1930s*. New York, NY: Back Bay, 2010, 154.

<sup>20</sup> Flessner, “Without TVA, Much of Chattanooga Would Now Be Underwater.”

<sup>21</sup> “CHRONICLE.” *Appalachian Journal*. 2019. 46 (3/4): 292–97. EBSCO. Interestingly, President Trump, in a tweet, advised the directors to keep open two aging coal-fired powerplants. The board however, did not heed the tweet and closed the plants.

steer the company free of political bias and remain focused on the people, towns, and cities where it operates. The Tennessee Valley Authority continues to be essential to the City of Chattanooga, but its citizens as well.

Created during a time of turmoil for the United States, the success of the Tennessee Valley Authority was unsure. President Roosevelt had set his hopes on the flooded region, eager to help the impoverished people. Even though some locals were bought off their family farms and relocated, the TVA worked to ensure the land was not for their gain alone. The TVA still has a profound effect on the City of Chattanooga, bring in new businesses and creating a greener, more vibrant city. Without the TVA, despite having to inconvenience farmers during its beginnings, has transformed Chattanooga, Tennessee into a city of prosperity, not leaving it as swampland.



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*Chickamauga Dam and powerhouse. General view of spillway with powerhouse in background.*

*On account of flooding hazard entire powerhouse built of concrete. Main generator hall in high portion, electrical controls and offices in downstream bay; projecting wing houses visitors' facilities and air conditioning. Roof of downstream bay developed as overlook terrace.* Chickamauga Dam. Hamilton County Tennessee, United States.

Between 1933 and 1945. Photograph.

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